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ABSTRACT

In recent years, strategies for multicultural education and human relations have been applied to progressively younger preschool children. This paper identifies five approaches to multicultural education, then goes on to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the predominant human relations approach. Challenging issues encountered in applying multicultural education to early childhood programs are then discussed. It is argued that a program committed to multicultural education will create an environment, recruit a staff, involve community resources, and provide toys and learning materials that reflect the diversity of the broader society. Recommendations concern: (1) creation of a multicultural environment; (2) parent involvement; (3) developmentally appropriate activities; and (4) holiday issues. It is concluded that the most important short-term goals may be enhancement of self-esteem and appreciation of human diversity. Long-range benefits will include preparing young people to build a more equitable and inclusive society. (RH)

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Creating Education That is Multicultural in Preschool and Kindergarten Settings

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In recent years, strategies for multicultural education and human relations have been applied to progressively younger preschool children. Often these applications have taken an additive and superficial approach, focusing on holidays, foods, and customs of "other people, other places," rather than being implemented in any sort of developmental framework for encouraging empathy, perspective-taking or increasing social sensitivity and responsibility. Indeed, when such models are applied to early childhood settings, they are likely to be long on theory, but short on practical ideas or evidence from research in actual preschool settings.

Approaches to Multicultural Education

Several approaches to multicultural education have been identified and described to Sleeter and Grant (1987; 1988). These include: 1) teaching the culturally different, 2) single group studies, 3) human relations, 4) multicultural education, and 5) education that is multicultural and social reconstructionist. Of these five approaches, human relations is the model most frequently applied to early childhood settings. The goals of this approach include helping students communicate with, accept and get along with people who are different from themselves, reducing or eliminating stereotypes, and helping children develop a healthy self esteem and identity.

Kendall (1983) uses the human relations approach to preface the goals of multicultural education for young children, as well as to develop recommendations for a basic multicultural curriculum and learning environment. Tiedt and Tiedt (1986) also utilized this approach in developing activities and resources for multicultural teaching. A major focus in the human relations approach is on the importance of teachers and caregivers using non-stereotypic materials with children.

The chief weakness of the human relations approach is that it seems to suggest that people should get along, communicate and appreciate each other within the existing stratified social system (Sleeter and Grant, 1987). Issues such as poverty, institutional racism, and other examples of the lack of equity in American society are not fully addressed in the human relations literature.

Education that is multicultural goes beyond more typical forms of multicultural education to include race, class, gender, age and exceptionality (Sleeter & Grant, 1987; 1988). When applied to older children, this construct also emphasizes preparing students to analyze and challenge oppression based on race, social class and gender in their school, local community and society. The importance of addressing these issues in developmentally appropriate ways with young children is addressed by Clemens (1988), Phillips (1988), and Swadener (1988), as well as by this article. Phillips emphasizes the importance of developing multicultural education into a process of **action**, through which adults gain clarity about the conditions of our society and how to change them, and then design appropriate curriculum strategies for schools and preschools.

In applying education that is multicultural to early childhood programs, a number of challenging issues are apparent. The first concerns preschool children's lack of "developmental readiness" or cognitive capacity to deal with cultural content, such as the significance of symbols to cultures, a sense of the history and issues of a group of people, or recognizing what constitutes a stereotype. Arguments against addressing complex cultural information with preschool children include the contention that the pre-operational child's egocentrism and relative lack of understanding of time, distance, and symbolism make it difficult to avoid superficial or stereotypic conceptions.

It has also been argued that young children can better understand information about ethnic diversity, for example, after they have had a number of concrete

experiences dealing with shared human needs, self-awareness, and acceptance of individual and family differences. However, to assume that early childhood curricula and environments need not reflect or incorporate the diversity of cultural, gender, linguistic, racial or special needs issues is to shirk from the responsibility of finding age-appropriate ways to do so.

In early childhood bilingual or multilingual classrooms, for example, opportunities for providing authentic and developmentally appropriate multicultural activities abound. Such activities need not take away from the important work and play of learning English and other important social and pre-academic skills. Rather, the children's own cultural background can be reflected in the materials chosen and ways in which new learning is facilitated (Swadener, 1987). Children in bilingual, mainstreamed, and other diverse settings have many opportunities to learn first-hand about individual differences, and this article includes a number of recommended activities.

Does this mean that early childhood programs serving less diverse groups of children should not attempt to implement education that is multicultural? Emphatically not! Education that is multicultural is equally relevant - and in many respects even more important - in less pluralistic settings. A program committed to education that is multicultural will work to create an environment, recruit a staff, involve diverse community resources and provide toys and other learning materials which reflect the diversity of the broader society, with its rapidly changing demographics. The following sections include specific developmental recommendations for creating such a multicultural early childhood program.

The recommendations provided for preschool and kindergarten programs are divided into the following topics: 1) creating a multicultural environment, 2) parent involvement, 3) developmentally appropriate and authentic activities, and 4) holiday issues.

Creating a Multicultural Environment

A critical first step in creating a multicultural environment is the recruitment and selection of staff who are committed to multicultural education, and who will provide children with positive role models for the adoption of a pluralistic point of view, including respect for individual differences. Caregivers must be willing to examine their own feelings and perspectives concerning others, as well as open to learning more about different aspects of human diversity. The staff should have a positive attitude toward all children, regardless of socioeconomic status, ethnic background, religious background, or race.

Another central issue in the creating of a multicultural environment is the composition of both the program staff and the children and families served. A program (the program staff and the children and families served) that is truly committed to education that is multicultural will manifest this commitment in the racial, ethnic, gender and overall diversity of its staff and student population. This often entails ha ing teachers or caregivers who are from similar backgrounds as their children to provide positive role models, enhance communication with children and their parents, and ease the transition from one environment to another. Having diversity in the teaching staff also provides children with a broader perspective on the world around them--even in more "monocultural" settings.

For program directors, this means that hiring a racially and gender-balanced staff will likely be a goal. Directors should also be aware of the need for on-going staff--and parent--development and support in trying out new approaches to multicultural education. Increasingly research evidence is showing that the role-modeling of non-sexist language and a racially gender-balanced staff an have a positive impact on children's interactions and attitudes toward human diversity (e.g., Swadener, 1988).

Another important aspect to consider when creating a multicultural preschool program is the location of the center. In order to have a diverse student and staff population, the center itself must be in the proximity of diverse neighborhoods, thereby making it accessible to families from various ethnic, racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition, location of the center near public transportation allows for more accessibility and diversity in the overall staff and family composition.

Beyond these critical aspects of staff and family diversity, the physical environment should reflect human diversity in as many authentic, non-stereotypic ways as possible. From the posters on the walls, magazines used to make collages, and music used at rug times, and during nap and for schedule transitions, to the literature selected and the dolls and other dramatic play props available to children, the preschool room should convey a **celebration of diversity.** For more monocultural programs this representation of the broader, multicultural society can be particularly important for later adjustment and acceptance of individual differences.

Parent Involvement

Parental participation, input, and support are critical aspects of any successful early childhood program, and are particularly important to multicultural centers. Addressing topics of race, class, gender and culture with parents may encourage parents to have more input into their children's activities and learning experiences. Of course, some may be opposed to multicultural education or feel threatened by it. Just as staff development, on-going reflection and values clarification, and support are needed for staff, parents often require support in grappling with these issues of diversity.

Traditionally, families have been responsible for teaching children about social issues such as race and class, as well as teaching them ethnic pride and many

aspects of their culture. Families may feel that programs which advocate education that is multicultural are intruding upon their responsibilities. Since issues of race, culture, gender and class are emotionally charged and often stimulate strong feelings, it is helpful to know how specific parents feel. Being able to predict how parents may react to different activities and information can help the teacher select an approach which will maximize parental acceptance of a multicultural curriculum and classroom (Ramsey, 1987). For example, being sensitive to Jewish or Islamic parent's views on the typical emphasis on Christmas or Easter activities in the preschool is very important (Swadener, Kaiser & Gudinas, 1988).

Parent conferences, as well as home visits and intake questionnaires, can provide tentative information on how parents feel about the racial, class and cultural composition of their community, as well as convey important information on family background and goals for their child(ren). Teachers need to listen carefully to parents in order to ask questions which will generate further information on how parents view their community, society as a whole and specific groups of people. (Ramsey, 1987).

Developmentally Appropriate and Authentic Activities

One of the major challenges in implementing education that is multicultural with preschool and kindergarten children is the struggle to provide developmentally appropriate activities, which do not leave children with superficial or even stereotypic views of cultural and racial diversity. Young children learn through the activities in which they engage and from the materials, tools and props which they use. Through the use of various materials children learn that there are various ways of cooking, eating, caring for babies, and transporting of goods. (Ramsey, 1987).

Consequently, when the commitment is made to have a multicultural program, care must be taken that the materials and activities which are used to enhance the children's perspective-taking and understanding of diversity are authentic in nature.

A fairly typical example of an inauthentic activity is the making of paper "Indian headresses" at Thanksgiving. Feathers are sacred symbols used in special ways in Native American ceremonies, and children's stereotypes about Indians are often reinforced through such well meaning, but culturally inappropriate crafts activities.

Gudinas (1986) recommends two general guidelines for analyzing early childhood materials and activities for authenticity:

1. Help children have authentic learning experiences about people by studying what they **do** and how they **feel**. For example, interact and interrelate with persons of their own or another culture. Attend or participate in authentic celebrations or festivals.
2. Help children have authentic learning experiences about people by studying what they **make** or produce. For example, see and appreciate authentic art forms. Cook and or eat authentic food and beverages.

When providing authentic experiences, it is strongly recommended to have a person from the culture represented present to interact with the children, so that the activities themselves don't become overemphasized, or become just another activity which is soon forgotten. In culturally diverse programs parents or other family members are often willing to share an activity or story with the children. In cases where a resource person is not available to come into the center, a "multicultural cadre" approach can be taken. For example, persons of different backgrounds can be identified and involved in the evaluation of proposed multicultural activities. This outside "authenticity check" can illuminate potential problems with activities, and thus prevent inappropriate activities or stereotypic learning.

Multicultural activities, like any activities in early childhood settings, must be developmentally appropriate and relevant to the children with whom they are to be implemented. Appropriate activities take into consideration the developmental

level of the child in all areas, including the physical, cognitive, social, emotional, creative and language aspects of development.

Age appropriate multicultural activities for infants and toddlers were discussed in an earlier companion article. Activities for preschool children, ages three to six-years-old, should build on children's everyday experiences and realities, and gradually encourage increasing perspective-taking and questioning about social issues. An individual differences approach is recommended for the preschool through early elementary years. This is also a time to begin empowering children to be social change agents, through introducing them to the concepts of race, differences between dislikes and prejudice, stereotypes, and to emphasize peace-making and cooperative problem-solving (Phillips, 1988; Swadener, 1988).

For such multicultural concepts to be meaningful to preschool children, a pervasive and developmental approach is necessary. Such a developmental approach involves beginning "where children are," with emphasis on encouraging self-awareness, identity and esteem and planning a variety of activities to promote awareness and acceptance of many types of individual differences. Such activities - both planned and spontaneous - are typical "get acquainted" activities in preschool and kindergarten classrooms, which can easily be expanded to become a regular part of the curriculum and classroom environment throughout the year.

Examples of recommended activities include body tracing and voice taping, "all about the" books, child of the week and other typical preschool activities help children discover their own unique characteristics while they learn about others. Activities focusing on differences and similarities of children's families, hobbies, favorite colors or foods can also contribute to children's acceptance of diversity. Affirmations, given verbally or written into a large book, and group art projects, such as a friendship mural or quilt, can also empower children's appreciation of their diverse peers. Puppets, dolls, role plays, records, field trips to different

neighborhoods, and classroom visitors can also reinforce these individual difference themes.

As children grow in their perspective-taking abilities and are better able to differentiate and label their emotions and opinions, activities should increasingly emphasize social problem-solving, and focus on expanding the child's community and world view. At this time, teachers can encourage children to begin to deal with stereotypes, likes, dislikes, prejudice and other social concepts. By age four or five, many children are also interested in learning words from different languages, and are more capable of benefiting from inter-cultural activities, which may involve parents or community resource people.

Examples of activities which can be used with children four through six (or older) include learning about peacemakers and social change leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., role-playing the Montgomery bus boycott, reading and comparing the Dr. Suess book Sneeches with what happened during the bus boycott (see Clemens, 1988), or introducing non-competitive games and encouraging cooperative activities. Preschool teachers can also begin to introduce relaxation techniques, including yoga, guided imagery, and songs and movement activities emphasizing cooperation and diversity (Reed, 1988).

In terms of gender, as discussed earlier, non-sexist language and expectations are as important as non-stereotypic or non-racist teacher actions and words. The availability of a variety of dramatic play props, and the encouragement of "non-traditional" roles (e.g., both boys and girls in nurturing, caregiving roles and both girls and boys in active, leadership roles) can give preschool children a powerful message at a critical age for the formation of gender identity. Again, a gender balanced staff can provide important role models and teachable moments. Obviously, recruiting and retaining qualified male preschool and kindergarten teachers is often a major challenge to programs. Accepting this challenge, and

having a gender-and racially-balanced staff as a program priority will contribute much to the implementation of education that is multicultural.

By age five, many children are interested in learning words, phrases and songs in other languages. Bilingual books, records and posters, and age-appropriate language instruction can contribute much to an early childhood program. Classroom visitors, including parents from different backgrounds, can be involved in reinforcing the linguistic diversity of a multicultural preschool. Also, acceptance of different accents, regional dialects, or speech mannerisms can be reinforced at this age.

Five- and six-year-old children are also becoming old enough to benefit from cross-cultural or "global awareness" activities - particularly if presented in authentic and age-appropriate ways. For example, units on different countries or regions can involve cooking activities, slides or movies, visitors, arts experiences, displays of authentic artifacts, and special props in the dramatic play area. Such units are particularly successful if some of the children are from, or have visited, the countries studied.

Preschools and kindergartens can also be matched with a "partner school". For example, Save the Children matches U.S. classrooms or preschools with schools in developing countries and encourages exchanges of children's art work, as well as the gathering and sending of needed school supplies and materials. The "Valentine Vision" program encourages children to make and send valentines to children in developing countries, and UNICEF's "Children Helping Children" program offers fund-raising ideas to support improved child health. Displays of photographs and children's art from a partner school can convey the value of international friendships to young children - and their families.

Holiday Issues

A final significant issue involved in developing multicultural strategies in early childhood programs is the issue of holidays. Holiday celebrations combine many

activities which children enjoy, such as cooking, eating, singing, dancing, and making decorations and costumes (Ramsey, 1987). Due to the relative ease of planning holiday activities, they have often been used as the main focus of multicultural education. Ramsey (1987) and Swadener, Kaiser and Gudinas (1988) warn that, while holidays offer more tangible ways of distinguishing cultural groups, they often become token gestures rather than authentic representation of cultural groups. For example, the symbol of the fish, which is prominant in Japanese Children's Day celebrations, is not meaningful to young children unless that have some related background experiences and knowledge of the importance of fish as a source of food in Japan (Ramsey, 1987).

Holidays are typically a viable and important contribution to multicultural education. They have the potential to promote positive cultural identity, appreciation of other life styles, and an awareness of the larger society. Thus, many early childhood educators argue that holiday activities should be presented as part of a comprehensive world view and not as isolated events (Ramsey, ibid.).

Since children observe different holidays, it is necessary to be sensitive to the culture of each child. It is also important to be sensitive to the religious basis for many of the holidays celebrated, and assess parents' attitudes about celebrating religious-based holidays in the preschool or kindergarten. For example, a simple questionnaire included at the time of in-take, or discussions at parent meetings or conferences may be good vehicles for parents to express their feelings and concerns about holiday issues and activities.

Since religious holidays are sensitive issues, a policy of accepting and appreciating various religions and the rituals which surround them is recommended. Teachers and parents need to have a dialogue and clear understanding concerning this policy before holiday-related activities are presented in the classroom. If staff and parents favor the inclusion of holiday-related activities, an attempt should be

made to celebrate the holidays which are important to, and which represent the various cultures of the children within the program. The activities related to these holidays can enhance children's self esteem by acknowledging and appreciating their cultural heritage, and peers within the classroom will likely become more knowledgeable about and better able to appreciate various cultural traditions and celebrations.

It is important to distinguish between activities about or related to holidays, and the promotion of the religion upon which the holiday is based. It is also critical to make the children's experiences as authentic as possible. For example, holidays provide an excellent time for parents to get involved in the classroom, or in sharing materials related to holidays celebrated in their families. Parents who are willing can lead an activity, or provide an age-appropriate explanation of their holiday traditions. For example, a Jewish parent might display items which are involved in the Hanukkah celebration, or an African-American parent who celebrates Kwanza might share aspects of this holiday with the children.

The commonality of holidays globally suggests that many holidays can be incorporated into a broader theme, or extended unit. Various holidays from nations and cultures around the world celebrate the seasons, the harvest, and the beginning of a new year. Even though some of these holidays fall on different calendar dates, providing meaningful experiences for young children is far more important than celebrating the actual dates. Examples of common themes of holidays across cultures include the autumn celebration of harvest festivals including Thanksgiving (beware of Native American stereotyping), Sukkot (Jewish), Kwanza (African and African American), Harvest Moon Festival (Chinese), and Ashura (Moslem). Harvest festivals celebrate good crops and the importance of the provision of food -- a theme to which all culture can relate. Such holidays also provide an opportunity for age-appropriate activities addressing hunger (see the World Hunger: Learning to Meet the Challenge curriculum guide).

Early childhood teachers are encouraged to incorporate diverse holidays into the curriculum without having them be the sole focus of the multicultural curriculum, thereby reinforcing the "holiday syndrome." Or, as one somewhat cynical educator commented, "If we keep on emphasizing foods and festivals and little else and calling it multicultural education, what we'll end up with are overweight kids who can dance!". Indeed, a more pervasive and authentic approach to reflecting cultural diversity is necessary if we are to create education that is multicultural in preschool and kindergarten settings.

Conclusion

The aims of education that is multicultural in early childhood go further than convincing children that they should appreciate the culture of diverse people through teaching about the history, art, music, food and customs of different cultures, and exposure to rituals and celebrations. Education that is multicultural must ultimately be aimed at preparing and equipping young children to tackle the problems of social inequality. The most important short-term goals may be enhancing self esteem and fostering appreciation of human diversity, but the long-range benefits will include preparing young people to build a more equitable and inclusive society. Our preschool and kindergarten children can be empowered to make a difference, and education that is multicultural offers a number of strategies for doing so.

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